

Daycare caterer passes off meals from discount stores as organic, kosher, halal ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A Toronto catering company that claims to have fed one million of the "highest-quality" meals to Ontario children is a fly-by-night operation working out of a fast-food restaurant and passing off conventional or poorly cooked food as premium fare.

Whole Green Kids, which caters to preschool child-care centres and Montessori schools in the GTA and Ottawa, promising locally grown, organic, as well as kosher and halal meals, delivers virtually none of the above, a Star investigation has found.

Former employees and suppliers describe a company in chaos - buying no-name foods at discount groceries and skimping on both quality and portions.

The three-year-old firm is run by Susan Blouin, a gregarious, smooth-talking entrepreneur who, despite declaring bankruptcy four years ago owing \$430,000, lives in a rented \$2.2 million Georgian home in Thorncrest Village and drives a Porsche Cayenne SUV.

Blouin told the Star her company is an "awful mess" and she blames a "mutiny by staff" for the problems. She is trying to make improvements.

At one time, Whole Green Kids catered to 75 schools in Toronto and Ottawa. Today it is a nomadic company cooking out of the basement of a banquet hall and a sports bar, on the run from creditors, its business unravelling as employees quit and one daycare centre after another cancels its contract.

Evicted from three different kitchens in the past six weeks for nonpayment of rent, Whole Green Kids is temporarily serving up daycare lunches out of a rented kitchen at Burrito Burrito Mexican restaurant on Highway 7 in Vaughan.

The Toronto Public Health is investigating complaints that Blouin cooked out of her home in Toronto, a breach of both provincial and municipal regulations for daycare food providers.

One former employee, who asked not to be named because she fears legal retribution, said the company did not deliver what it promised.

The former employee said Blouin is "telling them the food is organic, it's halal, it's kosher. It is none of those things. She was buying food at No Frills and had the staff repackage and pass it off as organic."

In an interview, Blouin acknowledged the company she launched promising "natural whole made foods" and "nutritional value and content is what defines our quality excellence" is going through a "tough patch."

Staff are conspiring to bring about her demise, Blouin says. Employees have stolen from her, she says, and she believes they have deliberately undercooked food and sprinkled peanut products in the kitchen, leaving children vulnerable to life-threatening allergies.

"If this can be proven, this could be considered very serious if any children got sick and hopefully would not die," Blouin said in a letter to the Star.

After pursuing Blouin through small claims court for more than a year, Don Aloisi, owner of Washington Produce, recently obtained a default judgment for \$6,000 in unpaid bills. He has not yet received his money.

"She never bought one box of organic anything," Aloisi said.

Former employees told the Star of undercooked meals, having to re-label no-name snacks as organic, and passing off chicken and beef purchased from Portuguese and Italian butchers as halal and kosher.

"I was told to write (on the packaging) kosher and halal, and I said, 'I have a problem with that,'" said one employee who started out as a delivery man, then replaced a chef who quit. "I said this is not right, you're messing around with people's religious beliefs."

Like other employees, he fears retribution from Blouin, who frequently threatens to sue or complain to the police when former employees raise concerns.

Former employees tell stories of milk bags left overnight in car trunks, ground beef driven to Ottawa in personal cars with no coolers and of undercooked chicken rushed off the grille to meet delivery deadlines. Prepackaged Knorr chicken soup was mixed with frozen

vegetables and passed off as homemade and organic, the former employees said.

One chef said Blouin handed him "six packs of chicken cup soup" and told him to make two huge pots that would feed several schools. The result was a watery, tasteless broth, he said.

As labour and delivery woes piled up, the daycares started cancelling.

"Let's just say it was just not up to standard," said Angelo Zaccheo, business manager at Waldorf Academy near Casa Loma, as to why the school cancelled its contract with Whole Green Kids. "I could give you a laundry list."

Blouin, who boasted her company has made 1,044,000 meals for kids in the past three years, will not say how many daycares remain as clients. The Star's research shows she is down to four in the GTA and six in Ottawa.

Blouin got the contracts, former employees say, because she promised wholesome, nutritious hot meal and two snacks, for about \$3.70 per child a day.

In a meeting with the Star, Blouin said she never claimed to be 100 per cent organic, and a clause in the contracts with the daycares allows her to substitute products depending on availability.

The company brochure claims it works with a nutritionist, and staff say the woman was responsible for ensuring kids with special dietary needs did not get allergy-triggering foods. When the nutritionist quit, Blouin did the job or assigned it to an 18-year-old prep chef whose previous job was as a cashier at a grocery store. Neither are nutritionists.

The Star contacted six daycare operators that formerly used Whole Green Kids. None would speak on the record, saying while they are concerned about the welfare of the children, they also fear backlash from parents.

"There's no need to identify the daycare centres," said one Ajax operator, who complained that chicken delivered to the daycare on "build your own sandwich day" was full of bones.

Delivery problems turned nightmarish as drivers quit, forcing daycares to scramble to feed hundreds of children without notice.

In one case, a driver ran out of gas on Highway 400 because Blouin, who hadn't paid him in weeks, expected him to pay for the gas. He refused. Daycares were told the meals were late because of a kitchen fire.

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Whole Green Kids operated out of a Dundas St. venue for three years until April 18, when landlord Jean Ann D'Aprile padlocked the premises because Blouin owes \$15,000 in back rent. Blouin hired a locksmith and went inside until a security guard called police, and staff were escorted out.

Three days later Blouin moved to the basement of the Berkeley Church, a historical gem dating back to 1871 now used for special events. They were evicted two weeks later. Berkeley staff said Blouin owed \$7,000 and left the kitchen a mess.

"So what if I owe them \$7,000?" an indignant Blouin said. "What's the big deal about owing somebody \$7,000?"

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The story is much the same in Ottawa, where until recently the company supplied 10 daycares including the Ottawa Montessori. Staff there reported being kicked out of three premises before moving into the kitchen of the party room in Blouin's downtown condo.

Except for some apples, nothing was organic, said an Ottawa employee, describing how staff would remove wrappers from no-name fruit bars, put them in clear plastic bags, and tie them with green ribbons to give it the "organic look."

She said she was never given the list of children with allergies and depended on Blouin, who often called in the middle of the night to read instructions, as the employee readied several hundred meals.

Cooking out of a private residence is a "definite no-no" says Jim Chan, manager of food safety for Toronto Public Health. Food prepared for daycares must be in a licensed and inspected "commercial" venue.

"We call those illegal kitchens or uninspected facilities," said Chan.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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